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The celebrization of indigenous activism: Tame Iti as media figure

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Julie Cupples and Kevin Glynn

Abstract

In recent years, a number of indigenous activists have gained celebrity status in ways that carry interesting implications for contemporary cultural politics. This paper focuses on the celebrification of Tame Iti, arguably Aotearoa/New Zealand's best-known Māori activist, within a wider cultural context characterized by intensifying media convergence, an expanding politics of decolonization, and the continuing elaboration of global indigenous mediascapes, including the Māori Television Service. We draw on forms of conjunctural analysis to explore how wider historical forces and social dynamics come to be embodied in particular flesh and blood individuals, who are thereby constituted as resonant media figures, who operate as both objects and agents of struggle, and who at once intervene in and shape, while also being shaped by, key terrains of contemporary discourse and cultural politics.

Keywords: media convergence, indigenous activism, celebrity, decolonization, cultural politics, Aotearoa/New Zealand, conjunctural analysis

Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed what we might refer to as the celebrization of indigenous activism. New Zealand Māori activist Tame Iti is one of a number of indigenous activists around the world who have become household names both nationally and globally. Others are Kayapo chief Raoni Metuktire from the Brazilian Amazon, Ecuadorian Kichwa activist Marlon Santí, Maya Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, Mirrar Australian Aboriginal anti-mining activist Yvonne Margarula,

Honduran Lenca activist Berta Cáceres and Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas from Chiapas in southern Mexico.¹ The ways in which these celebrity-activists challenge the capitalist and colonial status quo generate extensive solidarity and media attention, especially in alternative and social media spaces, as well as in mainstream media. Graeme Turner (2004: 8, 13) writes that “modern celebrity is . . . a product of media representation,” and “those who have been subject to the representational regime of celebrity are reprocessed and reinvented by it. To be folded into this representational regime . . . changes how you are consumed and what you can mean.” At the same time, the new media environment creates unprecedented opportunities for celebrities to intervene in and redirect the discursive and representational forces generated through celebritization. Some of the indigenous celebrity-activists noted above are media makers in their own right and make extensive use of both “old” media such as radio and television, and social media such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook to intervene in terrains of cultural and political struggle.

Struggling in defense of indigenous people’s rights has become a risky undertaking in many parts of the world. Many indigenous activists are subject to state-sanctioned racism, criminalization and incarceration as a consequence of their opposition to destructive neoliberal forms of development that threaten indigenous lands and lives (OHCHR 2018). In the worst cases, such as that of Berta Cáceres, they are brutally murdered. State-led or -endorsed violence often increases global solidarity and further builds the profiles of indigenous activists and their causes. Consequently, it can in part constitute or accelerate processes of indigenous celebritization. That the politics of celebrity culture can be multifaceted and contradictory has been recognized by scholars such as Turner (2004) and Chris Rojek

(2001). In spite of the work it does on behalf of global media conglomerates, celebrity culture also often functions as a site in which meanings of affluence, visibility, accountability, value, talent and inequality are contested and struggled over. In this paper, we adopt Olivier Driessens' (2012) distinction between the processes of "celebrification" whereby particular individuals achieve fame or notoriety, and the "meta-process" of "celebritization," which entails "societal and cultural changes" (p. 643) associated with the expansion and "embedding" of celebrity, including the "diversification" that ensues as celebrity penetrates "social fields" that have traditionally been "less permeated by celebrity status" (p. 645). We nominate the ongoing emergence of indigenous activism as a terrain for the production and consumption of celebrity as one such site of contemporary diversification in Driessens' sense.

McCurdy (2013) distinguishes between two different forms of celebrity activism: that associated with celebrities who harness their fame to promote political causes (which he calls "CA1") and that associated with those who achieve prominence or notoriety as a consequence of their political activism (which he labels "CA2"). There is a significant body of literature on celebrities who embrace and publicly promote humanitarian and political causes (see, e.g., Chouliariaki 2013; Hasian 2016; Kapoor 2012), but there has been much less scholarship on "CA2" or on indigenous celebrities, and even less work that focuses specifically on the celebrization of indigenous activism (but see di Piramo 2010; Krøvel 2011). This absence is surprising in light of widespread criticism of the strong colonial, "white saviour" and neoliberal implications of much "CA1" activism (see, e.g., Kapoor 2012). These critics have emphasized how CA1 activism often eclipses or marginalizes local and indigenous struggles for development or justice (Hasian 2016).

What work has been done on indigenous celebrity, nevertheless, does help us to understand its differences from other forms of celebrity and is suggestive of ways in which indigenous celebrity can be constituted and mobilized in counterhegemonic ways.

Like conventional celebrities, indigenous activists become the focus of public attention, appear across the convergent mediascape, and become implicated in the sense-making practices of media audiences and commentators, state actors and political activists. But because indigenous activism emerges out of resistance to both colonialism and capitalism, its celebritization is potentially productive of a quite different cultural politics than that typically enacted around celebrities who become known for their music, movies or sporting talent (or who become “well-known for their well-knownness,” in Daniel Boorstin’s famous phrase [quoted in Turner 2004: 5]), and who then publicly embrace an activist cause. Celebrified indigenous activists have the potential to draw attention to anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles without being seen as engaged in hypocritical modes of brand-building. As Jane Stadler (2009: 323) writes, prominent indigenous activists’ “ability to embody ideas and identities from the periphery, to revalue cultural difference and enable recognition of the rights of the disadvantaged, and to inspire social change is perhaps the ultimate potential of the postcolonial celebrity.” Nevertheless, indigenous activism isn’t immune to commodification nor to the complex interplay of both top-down and bottom-up forces that drives all celebrity culture (see Couldry and Markham 2007). While the celebrity status of indigenous activists is not industry-driven in quite the same way as that of conventional celebrities, celebritization enables activist performances to provide good material for ratings-driven television that can complicate the grassroots underpinnings of this activism. While not all indigenous

media forms should be understood as reactions to non-indigenous media and society (York, 2016), the celebritization of indigenous activism cannot always be separated easily from other forms of celebrity activism that may be more complicit with the forces of commercialization and neoliberalism (see Krøvel 2011). For instance, Sting's support for the Kayapo cause brought about the celebrification of Chief Raoni, though the latter then became a compelling media figure capable of attracting global attention without the presence of the former.

A major problem for "CA2" activists of all sorts concerns the forces of individualization that are central to celebrity culture (McCurdy 2013; di Piramo 2010; Stadler 2009). Because the Zapatista struggle, for instance, strives for both collectivism and leaderlessness, and rejects capitalism's "hyper-individualism" (McCurdy 2013: 322), Subcomandante Marcos sought to avoid celebrification and presented himself simply as a spokesperson (albeit a highly articulate and media-savvy one) for the movement. But the cult of personality that surrounded Marcos dominated the Zapatista rebellion in problematic and often distracting ways (di Piramo 2010; Hesketh and Morton 2014). In May 2014, he therefore terminally interrupted his own celebrification by announcing that "Marcos" was no more and would be replaced by Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés (see *desinformémonos* 2014).

This paper deploys a form of conjunctural analysis to explore the figuration and celebrification of a Māori activist in a rapidly changing media environment and political context, in order to understand how his activism both shapes and is shaped by the celebritizing and neoliberal conjuncture within which it is constituted. This approach enables us to see how the mediation of Māori struggles can exploit opportunities to unsettle persistent colonial confidence. To achieve these aims, we

have viewed and analysed a large number of media texts featuring Tame Iti, as well as the discursive activity conducted around these texts in the convergent mediasphere. We have also spent time talking with Iti about his activism and its mediation and remediation.²

Colonial violence and media figures

Conjunctural analysis was put at the center of cultural studies practice by Stuart Hall and others at the Birmingham CCCS during the 1970s. It is not so much a “method” to be “applied” as an analytical approach driven by a theoretical orientation that is rigorously anti-essentialist, radically contextualist, and focused upon forms and sites of contestation where cultural struggles to constitute hegemony and society in one or another way are waged. Lawrence Grossberg (2010) argues that a conjuncture is a “problem-space” (p. 58) constituted by “a complex articulation of discourses, everyday life, and what Michel Foucault would call technologies or regimes of power” (p. 25). Conjunctural analysis “seeks to identify the balance of conflicting forces at work within a particular social formation” (Adams et al. 2017: 52). It is attuned to the historical and geographical specificities that constitute a time, place and the political tensions and opportunities embedded therein (Grayson & Little 2017: 61-2). It attends to the contested, contradictory and antagonistic conditions within which events unfold and which provide possibilities for political interventions and transformations. “Thinking conjuncturally allows us to historicise the present” and illuminates opportunities “to take steps towards a new way of organising society” (Grayson & Little 2017: 62). For Gramsci, conjunctures are useful in part as categories of historical analysis and strategies of periodization. Crises that carry the potential to shift conjunctures are not discrete events but rather processes that can

unfold without resolution for decades (Hall 1986: 13). As Stuart Hall (1987: 20) wrote near the end of the last millennium, successive British conjunctures had by then “been in a deep social crisis for most of the 20th century.” Cultural studies has a long history of mobilizing conjunctural analysis to understand “societies (or areas within them) at points of crisis . . . where social struggle is most acute and most visible,” and so where social relations are most amenable to change (Fiske 1991: 472). Grossberg (2010) argues that the concept of the conjuncture is the key to grasping the specifically radical, anti-essentialist contextualism that differentiates cultural studies from other scholarly practices. Tame Iti’s activism takes place within a conjunctural assemblage characterized by the persistence of colonial discursivity, violence and dispossession, as well as by Māori political and cultural struggles that have brought about dramatic changes in recent decades. Māori cultural politics and activism have successfully intervened in the reproduction of colonial practices and formations and have generated a measure of political redress, including the achievement of important treaty settlements through the Waitangi Tribunal,³ the return of at least a small proportion of stolen lands, the payment of financial compensation by the Crown for past misdeeds, the development of Māori language immersion educational institutions such as Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa, and the establishment of the Māori Television Service.

New Zealand media have functioned as agents of coloniality since at least as far back as the mid-19th century. As Derek Fox (1993) noted more than two decades ago, NZ media have tended to either ignore Māori stories, in particular those pertaining to Māori success beyond the worlds of sport and entertainment, or to represent Māori as prone to criminality, social dysfunction, and involvement in “disruptive” forms of activism and protest. Māori, like indigenous peoples elsewhere,

have been producing their own media in order to challenge such limited representational repertoires and to tell their own stories using their own words and images. The forms of convergence and fragmentation that typify the contemporary media environment have facilitated the expanded production, circulation and consumption of indigenous discourses and representations. The presence of Māori media at a time when Māori have made quite significant political and cultural gains in other spheres, has unsettled established discursive formations and provoked many Pākehā (i.e., European descended) journalists working in mainstream media to increasingly acknowledge the legitimacy of Māori grievances (Adams et al. 2017). At the same time, however, the geopolitics of the post-9/11 world have facilitated the widespread recoding of indigenous political struggle as “terrorism,” a development whose consequences were apparent in the police “terror raids” on Māori territory in Te Urewera in 2007 (Adams et al. 2017; Devadas 2013). Tame Iti’s activism thus takes place within a complex conjuncture marked by the fluid and contradictory dynamics of media convergence and the generation of new spaces of material and discursive struggle whereby neoliberal capitalism and coloniality are both intensively contested *and* reasserted.

We also draw here on the concept of the *media figure* to explore how larger historical forces and social dynamics come to be embodied in and represented through particular individuals. “Figure” is both a noun and a verb, and media figures always operate as both objects and agents of struggle who at once intervene in and shape, while also being shaped by, key terrains of contemporary discursive and cultural politics. As John Fiske (1996: 69) writes, media figures are products of our hypermediated age, and a figure is thus “a hyperreal person whose reality includes both a body . . . composed of flesh, bone, and blood and a body of infinitely

reproducible signifiers or electronic dots on a . . . screen.” Although the body of an individual who becomes a media figure may be “comparatively powerless in determining the way he or she is to be figured, it is extremely powerful in giving the histories” and social alliances with which it is associated “a material presence, in making them live, in making them visible and audible, and in making them matter in, and become the matter of, everyday life” (Fiske 1996: 70-1). Media figures become terrains of struggle, as well as points of articulation through which social interests and alliances speak and can be made heard. It is the physical and electronic embodiment of social and historical interests in media figures that makes them popular sites of engagement, for in “an age of electronic figures and of hypervisibility, embodied histories and politics are the ones that matter . . . because alliances, for or against, are more easily formed with a figure” than with an abstract political position (Fiske 1996: 76). Media figures resonate with viewers, audiences and citizens because they tap into a society’s deepest fault lines, axes of division, and reservoirs of affective and discursive energy.

Writing in the context of neoliberalism in the UK, Imogen Tyler (2013: 10) develops what she calls a “figurative method” that traces the “fabrication and repetition of abject figures across” multiple sites such as the popular media, government policy formulations, and the discourses of academic experts. These abject figures, including immigrants and welfare recipients, function as “ideological conductors” that are “mobilized to do the dirty work of” neoliberalism, by serving to justify punitive economic, social and political measures (ibid: 9). In our case, the figure of Tame Iti is mobilized as an ideological and discursive conductor of both colonial and decolonial forces and meanings. Tame Iti is a flesh and blood person (in Māori, a *tangata*), but he is also a mediated assemblage composed of “all available

public texts” about him, and is therefore subject to diverse modes of political and discursive activation and rearticulation (see Molina-Guzmán 2010: 51-20). The concept of the media figure is theoretically useful for engaging with the celebritization of indigenous activism because it helps to account for the impossibility of finally and definitively distinguishing between the reality of the individual and the discursive mediation of the figure, as well as helping to understand the ongoing capacity of the figure to serve as a terrain of struggle across a variety of sites and issues.

Tame Iti as indigenous celebrity activist

Tame Iti (Tūhoe /Waikato/Te Arawa) is New Zealand’s best known and most intensely mediated indigenous activist. He has been fighting for Māori sovereignty for more than four decades. He’s also an accomplished artist, a radio broadcaster, and a social worker. Our reason for focusing on “Tame Iti” as a media figure, far from wishing to individualize the generations-long struggle for Māori sovereignty, is aimed precisely at the demonstration of how social and historical forces come to be condensed and embodied within particular sets of texts and images that thereby themselves constitute terrains of contestation where political victories and losses accrue and contribute to the production, reproduction or destabilization of this or that conjunctural assemblage. Iti is of course not the only famous Māori activist, although he certainly is one of the most recognizable of the current generation, and is sometimes described in the media as *the* face of Māori activism. He’s well known for his disruptive, hyperperformative, theatrical and media-savvy style of protestation. His full facial *moko* makes him easily recognizable and in the eyes of many Pākehā dangerously radical (see Figure 1). His methods have frequently unsettled many New

Zealanders, including some Māori, and have often attracted condemnation from conservative sectors of the political and media establishments.

[Insert Figure 1.]

Tame Iti was born in Rotorua in 1952 and raised in the Tūhoe nation, a territory that covers the Bay of Plenty and Ureweras on the East Coast of the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Tūhoe were hit particularly hard by colonialism. They never signed the Treaty of Waitangi and have been subject to violent police repression, land confiscations and scorched earth tactics since the 1800s. Iti was politicized at an early age, when his *whāngai* (adoptive) father drew his attention to the colonial violence and land dispossession their *iwi* (tribe) had endured, and from his experience of attending school in the small Tūhoe town of Ruatoki—“the school that colonized Tūhoe” (*Waka Huia*, “Māori Activist Tame Iti,” 2010)—where Māori children were punished if they spoke Māori on school grounds. Tame has also lent his support to a number of radical and anti-capitalist actors and movements around the world, including the Black Panthers, the Zapatistas, the Cuban Revolution, and the fight against apartheid in South Africa, and has travelled to China, Nepal, Fiji, Tahiti and the US in support of indigenous and revolutionary causes.

Iti became visible in the media in the 1970s through his membership of Ngā Tamatoa (The Warriors), a group of young activists who fought for Māori land and language rights (see Figure 2). Iti was inspired by Aboriginal activism in Australia and tired of being treated, as he put it, “like foreigners in our own land” (*Ngā Tamatoa: 40 Years On*, 2012), so in 1975 he established a “tent embassy” outside New Zealand’s parliament building in Wellington. The embassy consisted of a banner affirming “Māori control of Māori things,” flying over a borrowed tent where Iti introduced himself to visitors as the Māori ambassador. Years later, Iti recalls that

“most Pākehā were quite shocked by that,” as Māori “were meant to be very obedient” (*Ngā Tamatoa: 40 Years On*, 2012).

[Insert Figure 2.]

In 1981, Iti was on the front lines of the nationwide anti-apartheid protests against the visiting South African Springboks rugby team, which drew global media attention to Aotearoa/New Zealand. These protests against apartheid are widely understood to have sparked a modern Māori cultural and political renaissance. They were crucial to the creation of the conditions of possibility for sharpened discussion and debate among New Zealanders about forms of pervasive but mostly unacknowledged (in mainstream discourse) racism. At the time, the predominant mythologies of the Pākehā majority cast New Zealand race relations in Panglossian terms. The nationwide protests against the South African rugby tour ruptured these racial mythologies in ways that would facilitate important advances in Māori struggles for cultural rights and the redress of historical grievances concerning land and resource privation stretching back nearly a century and a half. Moreover, the intensification of transnational affective alliances between Māori and Black South Africans contributed to a growing Māori political will and sense of righteous indignation, while Pākehā protestors’ concerns for the plight of racially subordinated peoples half a world away lent enhanced moral leverage to Māori demands for racial justice closer to home.

Over the course of the 1980s, Iti continued to engage in public activism and decolonial struggles. For instance, he protested against the establishment of commercial pine tree stands on a sacred Tūhoe mountain (1985), established a roadblock in the small town of Taneatua on Waitangi Day to raise awareness of the many historical violations of Māori treaty rights by the Crown (1988),⁴ and stood in

the Whakatane River to protest against the pollution of waterways by commercially operated jetboats (1989). In the decades since, Iti has developed a shrewd sense of theatricality and of what we'd like to call media tricksterism through which he has intervened within the realms of politics and media in ways that have been challenging and that have both drawn upon and contributed to wider social transformations within Aotearoa/New Zealand. As William J. Hynes writes, the trickster is a “border breaker” (1993a: 33), “transforming bricoleur” (1993a: 43), “situation-invertor” (1993a: 37), “metaplayer,” “revealer” (1993b: 202), and agent “*of creativity who transcend[s] the constrictions of monoculturality*” (1993b: 212, italics in original). Through his media presence, tricksterism and sense of theatricality, Iti has come to figure and personify a century and a half of colonial violence, dispossession and struggle for wider contemporary NZ publics, including even a Pākehā “anti-fandom” for whom his modes of performativity serve as unwelcome reminders of historical and persistent inequities and injustices.

In a 2015 TEDx Talk (*Mana: The Power in Knowing Who You Are*, 2015), Iti recounts one of his interventions vis-à-vis attempts by a conservative New Zealand government to put a premature end to Māori claims for compensation in relation to a century and a half of treaty violations by the Crown. In 1994, the conservative National Party government sought to establish a permanent total budget cap on any and all future claims before the Waitangi Tribunal. All future payments in compensation for past land thefts and other treaty violations against Māori by the Crown would therefore be abruptly and permanently terminated as soon as the amount of money allocated arbitrarily in 1994 was entirely spent. During a *hui* (assembly) held in the town of Ōpōtiki to discuss this so-called fiscal envelope proposal, Iti performed a characteristic form of political theatrics. While a group of

tribal elders were discussing stolen Tūhoe lands with government officials on the stage of the assembly hall, Iti was gradually moving from the back of the audience in the hall toward the stage with a stepladder. The audience became increasingly distracted from the official proceedings by Iti's deliberate and incremental advancement with the ladder toward the stage. When Tūhoe leaders finished their formal presentation to the government and the crowd stood in support, Iti mounted his ladder in the front of the hall and made clear that he had no intention of looking up toward the Crown officials but instead "wanted to look down on" them as he intoned, "Ko ahau te rangatira i tenei wa. Naku te korero. I am the chief now. It is my turn to speak" (Gardiner 1996: 86-7). Iti then went on to present the government minister in charge of Treaty of Waitangi negotiations with a horse blanket inscribed with a list of Tūhoe grievances, including a reminder that more than 50,000 acres of prime agricultural and coastal lands had been stolen from them by the Crown. Inverting the colonial custom of purporting to offset the colonizers' thefts and atrocities with gifts of blankets, Iti was now offering the Crown "a blanket for my land back" (see Emmerson 2011). The Crown kept the gift and even hung it on the wall at the Office of Treaty Settlements, but failed to return the stolen lands, so in 1998 Iti sent the government an invoice for \$11,250 (*Mana: The Power in Knowing Who You Are*, 2015).

Such activist theatricality and tricksterism have garnered media attention throughout Iti's career and have helped him to amplify and more widely circulate Māori perspectives on coloniality as violence and injustice. In 1999, for instance, in order to raise awareness of the history of colonialism in the Tūhoe nation, Iti issued eviction notices to Pākehā farmers living on Tūhoe land beyond the confiscation line (the boundary that separates stolen lands from the rest of Tūhoe territory) and

announced that those living on stolen land had 12 months to vacate these lands. He then waited for a call from the media, which came early the next morning from Radio Pacific. When he was asked on air why he had issued these eviction notices, Iti replied,

Well, let me tell you this story. In 1860 we too were also issued an eviction notice. We were only given three months to vacate the place. And so they came through and those who refused to move after three months, not only were they shot on the spot, but their homes were burned to the ground. And their gardens were burned to the ground.

As Tame said to us of this event, suddenly “you’ve got 35,000 people [listening to the radio] who had never heard that story before. So, you capture your audience” (interview, July 2015).

In 2004, Iti held an art exhibition in Auckland that he called “Meet the Prick” (see Peters 2004). He invited the conservative National Party spokesperson for Māori affairs, Gerry Brownlee, to open the show. Brownlee is one of the politicians that frequently expressed vociferous opposition to the creation of Māori Television. In a documentary bearing the same title as the exhibition, Iti emphasizes how the use of the word “prick” (along with the ambiguity over *which* of two men is “*the* prick”) is a tactic of “manipulation” that attracted substantial mainstream media attention to both his exhibition and his activism (*Meet the Prick*, 2005).

In 2005, members of the Waitangi Tribunal travelled to Ruatoki to meet with Tūhoe and Iti was in charge of organizing the welcome party. He decided to create a theatrical enactment of the 1860 scorched earth policy on the confiscation line. The Crown representatives arrived to shouting, burning cars, and Tūhoe on horseback. They witnessed Iti performing a *whakapohane* (bearing of the buttocks), which is,

according to Māori scholar Pat Hohepa, “the ultimate culturally sanctioned Māori way of displaying opprobrium” (Mihaka and Prince 1984: 15), and brandishing a shotgun, which he used to fire at a New Zealand flag that was lying on the ground. For Iti, these displays were necessary to remind the Crown of its history of atrocities against Tūhoe: “a hundred years ago they burned this place down. So, the Crown is coming here to hear your story. So, we need to create tension, firearms, guns, because that all happened in 1860. Fire, smoke, yelling, screaming, all of that” (interview, July 2015). After filmmaker Robert Pouwhare’s footage of the reenactment was shared with mainstream media, the images of Iti shooting the New Zealand flag were shown over and over again on national television where they provoked Pākehā rage and were “derided as [a] mere theatrical gimmick, or a form of violent anti-diplomacy” (Edmonds 2015: 189). Nevertheless, Iti’s reenactments also exposed the violence and brutality of New Zealand’s colonial histories and “opened the space of the political to create a new reading of the past” (Edmonds 2015: 189). This reading would become increasingly significant as Tūhoe moved closer to settling its differences with the Crown through the Waitangi Tribunal.

Actions like flag shooting, calling someone a prick and performing a *whakapohane*, which may be deemed “vulgar” by Pākehā, thus give targeted offence that necessarily unsettles the dominant Pākehā discourse of New Zealand as a harmonious bicultural nation. Amber A’Lee Frost (2016) has emphasized the importance of vulgarity as a political weapon that helped to dismantle royal privilege during the French revolution. Iti’s “vulgarity” is counterposed to the colonial façade of civility and politeness that masks violence, socio-economic exclusion, and other atrocities. It might indeed be read as a counter-discourse through which the

disproportionate incarceration, unemployment and social marginalization of Māori are resignified as unacceptable and intolerable colonial vulgarities.

While Iti was established as a figure of Māori radicalism in the media by 2005, this figuration would be reconfigured, intensified, and contested in the wake of the 2007 Urewera terror raids, when heavily armed riot police bearing warrants obtained under the NZ Terrorism Suppression Act (2002) raided Ruatoki and a number of other sites around New Zealand after a year-long surveillance operation. They arrested 18 people, including Tame Iti. The people of Ruatoki, whose doors and windows were smashed and whose homes were ransacked, were terrorized by these raids. The police claimed that the Tūhoe were operating guerrilla training camps in the bush. Iti was thus refigured as terrorist. Howard Broad, commissioner of the NZ Police, described Tūhoe behaviour on Tūhoe land as “unacceptable” and insisted that the police raiders were acting “in the public interest.” Prime Minister Helen Clark stated that “paramilitary training in the Ureweras by disaffected people of many ethnicities is distressing and abhorrent to our people” (*October 15: After the Raids*, 2010).

The terror raids and criminal charges against those detained became important stories in the media during the days, months and years that followed. The mainstream media coverage of the raids reproduced power-bearing Pākehā discourses of Māori as dangerous extremists (see Abel, 2008; Jackson, 2008; Morse, 2008; Devadas, 2013; Adams et al. 2017). The footage of Iti’s 2005 flag shooting was enlisted in the ongoing production of Tame Iti as a figure of terrorism. This footage was replayed endlessly on mainstream national TV in ways that refigured its meanings through its recontextualization within post-9/11 discourses of terrorism. However, Māori Television, which was well established by 2007, worked hard to disarticulate Iti in

particular and Tūhoe in general from discourses of terrorism, and to rearticulate the meanings of the raids themselves by linking them to the nation's long histories of colonial violence. Moreover, the raids drew damning criticism from Māori leaders, whose voices circulated through both indigenous and mainstream media. Increasingly, as a consequence of this discursive contestation, the police actions began to appear excessive, unjustified, and terroristic in their own right and all charges of terrorism against Iti and the others were ultimately dropped.

Nevertheless, Iti was tried and jailed on firearms charges in 2012. The trial and its coverage provided the media with an opportunity to refigure Iti as a violent extremist, but also to interrogate coloniality and police brutality, and to explore Tūhoe history and cultural practices. This came about partly as a consequence of contestation over the application of discourses of terrorism to Tūhoe, as noted above, but also partly as a consequence of negotiations between the iwi and the Waitangi Tribunal, so that the 2007 terror raids and the much longer history of colonial terrorization of Tūhoe by the Crown became increasingly intertwined constituents of a common discursive terrain. While the negotiations were an attempt to settle grave historical injustices, the 2007 terror raids, undertaken on unceded Tūhoe land, became increasingly available for media figuration as an instance of (colonial) history repeating itself. The verdict and sentencing were of interest to all New Zealand media, so Tame took advantage of the television cameras both inside and outside the courtroom to display his lack of deference to the colonial legal system, to emphasize that the application of justice is not culturally neutral and to draw attention to the fact that the New Zealand justice system was imported from Britain and should not be applied to indigenous peoples. When he left the courtroom after the verdict in March 2012, he spoke only in Māori to the large phalanx of assembled media, which was

heavily armed with cameras and recorders. After thanking all the Māori around the country that had supported him, he recited: “Hei tira tira, te poti me te whira, te kau hūpeke te maramu” This is the Māori translation of the English nursery rhyme, “Hey Diddle Diddle,” which he was taught in English at the primary school where students were forbidden from speaking Māori. Tame would later explain to us that he understood the use of such nursery rhymes to be part of a larger colonial strategy that attempts first to disorganize or scramble the minds of colonized peoples (“hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon . . .”) so they could then be put together differently (personal communication, July 2015). At the moment of his sentencing in May 2012, Tame performed a loud *haka* that disrupted the constructed and enforced solemnity of the courtroom.

Indigenous celebrity activism, conjunctural shifts and the politics of estrangement

Over the years, as well as appearing frequently on prime time news reports, Iti has also featured in a large number of documentaries. He has used these more expansive media spaces to reflect on his problematic figurations in mainstream media that “use what they’ve captured to belittle us” (*Waka Huia*, “Māori Activist Tame Iti,” 2010) and notes that

the majority of the people in this country, particularly Pākēha and Māori too, well they view me from split second images, six o’clock news TV1, TV3, it’s all crap. They got it wrong, I’m a nice guy, yeah true, I’m a pussycat (*The Man Behind the Moko*, 2005).

As Rojek (2001: 11) writes, “celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self,” such that people who are celebrified “surrender a portion of the

veridical self, and leave the world of anonymity and privacy behind” (2001: 20). Iti has developed strategies for the reclamation and rearticulation of his figuration—and that of Māori more broadly—in much mainstream media. When asked by Michael Morrah about his theatrical rifle attack on the New Zealand flag, images of which circulated widely as “evidence” of indigenous “terrorism,” Iti resignified these images by articulating them with historical narratives of colonial terror inflicted on Tūhoe by Pākehā through scorched-earth and stolen land tactics: “I’m not [a threat to the nation]. I have not stolen any Pākehā lands. I have not killed any Pākehā. I have not punched any Pākehā” (*Third Degree*, “Iron Māori: Tame Iti,” 2013). In this way, Iti “raises the question of who has been terrorizing whom and challenges mainstream New Zealanders’ refusal to acknowledge the colonial violence that has accompanied their presence in New Zealand” (Adams et al. 2017: 79). As Iti tells Rawiri Patene in *Ngā Tamatoa: Forty Years On* (2012), “Tūhoe has been terrorized, the whole country has been terrorized.” These interventions, moreover, highlight the imperializing force of mainstream modes of media representation and celebritization.

The year 2015 saw the release of a new documentary, *The Price of Peace*, which explored Tame Iti, the Tūhoe communities that were turned upside down by the terror raids, and the work done by police to repair the damage they had inflicted upon these communities. The film’s director, Kim Webby (2015), sought to counter dominant mainstream media depictions of Iti by revealing a “softer man” who wears “many hats” and is “a father, grandfather, artist, health worker, radio announcer, community leader and, these days, a kaumātua” (elder). This film screened in cinemas across the country and was broadcast on Māori Television. Social and other media activity around *The Price of Peace* suggests an expansion of Iti’s celebrification, a growing appreciation for his activism, and a widening recognition

that colonial violence continues in New Zealand. *The Wairarapa Times-Age* reported that a Masterton cinema “ignited a social media frenzy after posting to Facebook a trailer of festival film *Price of Peace* that drew more than 100,000 views” (Norman 2015). The Facebook post also sparked a lengthy conversation thread that captured the positive energy, excitement and interest surrounding the film. The cinema’s social media manager said they had “not had a reaction like this to a movie before,” and that *The Price of Peace* attracted more engagement than a typical Hollywood blockbuster. This kind of convergent media activity reveals that Tame Iti as celebrity activist media figure is beginning to occupy a different location within both the NZ mediascape and society more broadly. In recent years, Tame has been invited to do longer interviews on radio and television and to give prestigious public lectures. Competing figurations of Iti—as troublemaker or extremist, for example—do nevertheless continue to resurface. That is to say, he continues to be a socially resonant and contested figure.

The figure of Tame Iti thus forms part of a “symbolic battleground” (see Beltrán 2002: 89) upon which New Zealand’s colonial past and colonial/postcolonial present are negotiated. Iti struggles upon this battleground and is constituted by it. He is figured and constrained by colonizing discourses and practices, but also subjects them to interrogation and destabilization, and takes advantage of the convergent media environment to engage in practices of articulation, disarticulation and re(con)figuration. One recent study of Iti’s tweets from prison, for example, shows how his social media strategies “dismantle[d] the communication barriers of spatial confinement and . . . counter[ed] dominant narratives” (Elers and Elers 2018: 81) by offering audiences insights into the solidarities and communities formed inside the prison, by working to maintain key Māori cultural practices, and by providing

alternative commentaries on wider NZ social issues. Hence while much of the media activity around Iti enacts the resilience of coloniality in New Zealand, the figuration of Iti as radical extremist or terrorist has been impossible to sustain as the conjuncture has shifted, in part as a consequence of Tame's modes of celebrity activism. As the Tūhoe chief negotiator Tamati Kruger noted during the Urewera trial, the current generation of New Zealanders is "more open and comfortable about dialogue and debate around Treaty issues" (Thorby 2012). These changes influence how people engage with and understand Iti's activism, and require mainstream media to shift, too, or risk losing both viewers and influence. The stigmatization of Iti that worked in one conjunctural moment begins to lose its discursive force in another, somewhat reconfigured and shifting one.

The shifting conjunctural assemblage is clearly revealed by the official apology to Tūhoe made by the Crown representative, Chris Finlayson, in 2014 at the time of their settlement—an apology that was all but unimaginable back in 2007 when the police conducted the terror raids. Finlayson proclaimed:

Ngāi Tūhoe, it's your day. The relationship between Tūhoe and the Crown, which should have been defined by honour and respect, was instead disgraced by many injustices including indiscriminate raupatu [confiscations], wrongful killings, and years of scorched-earth warfare. The Crown apologises for its unjust and excessive behaviour and the burden carried by generations of Tūhoe who suffer greatly and carry the pain of their ancestors (cited in Fox 2014).

Along with this historic apology, Tūhoe received a treaty settlement of \$170 million and the return of Te Urewera, which is no longer a national park and whose legal personhood is now enshrined in New Zealand law. Iti has pronounced that "we finally

got respect and understanding from the Crown” (*Mana: The Power in Knowing Who You Are*, 2015), which has been refigured in the media as an agent of colonial violence, as “incivility” is disarticulated from Iti and rearticulated to the settler state. A review of early media interviews with Iti suggests that he never expected Māori to achieve as much as they have (see *Keskidee Aroha*, 1980). The post-settlement terrain for Tūhoe is a radically changed one full of hopes for the future, new opportunities, and a renewed sense of struggle for the recognition of Tūhoe sovereignty. According to Iti, the challenge for Tūhoe now is to rebuild their nation, to organize their own spatial planning strategies and to reach through their own media to all Tūhoe who are living outside the iwi’s traditional lands (interview, July 2015). In other words, the conjuncture demands new and different kinds of struggle.

Like other celebrity activists, Iti must negotiate the tension between his firm commitment to collective struggle and celebritization’s drive to produce a “spectacle of individuals” capable of reproducing “the code of hyper-individualization pushed by consumer culture” (McCurdy 2013: 322). He’s acutely aware of the ways in which his activism has been repeatedly refigured and disfigured in order to sell newspapers and TV advertising, and emphasizes to us that he is “passionately committed to the liberation of the Tūhoe nation” and that he’s just “another little dot of the story” (interview, July 2015). It is striking that his paintings seem often to depict large crowds filled with multitudes collectively peopling the landscape, and he stresses that decisions about the future of Tūhoe are being taken by the *rangatahi* (younger people), with *kaumātua* like him helping with “fine-tuning” (personal communication, May 2016).

The figuration of Iti as dangerous radical, extremist, or terrorist facilitates the erasure of the violence of colonialism. This figuration enabled and legitimized the

terror raids and Iti's incarceration. But media figures can only function as ideological conductors for dominating powers for as long as conjunctural conditions allow it. Conjunctural shifts have facilitated new figurations and called forth new strategies. Lilie Chouliaraki (2013), while highly critical of the past and present forms of solidarity that develop around celebrity humanitarianism, and in particular the narcissistic cultural dispositions that they engender, ends her book *The Ironic Spectator* by suggesting that engagement around indigenous activism might produce a progressive or even radical mode of estrangement. Such estrangement involves three elements: "exposure to otherness," "engagement with argument" and the "reversal of humanization" whereby sufferers who are different from an implicitly Western "us" are "endowed with a sense of . . . humanity" through depictions of their asymmetrical power relation with a dominating figure who is "like 'us'" (Chouliaraki 2013: 199-200), as in some of the media coverage of the terrorizing aspects of police raids on ordinary Māori members of the community of Ruatoki. While Chouliaraki is focused on distant suffering, there is some evidence that gaining familiarity with Iti's activism and engaging with arguments around sovereignty, racism and coloniality are producing a progressive kind of estrangement among at least some New Zealanders.

We'd like to end with an anecdote that illustrates both the impact of Tame's celebrification and the extent to which his figuration as a dangerous radical and terrorist has been effectively subverted and reconfigured. In May 2016, one of us (Julie) travelled with Tame from Wellington to a conference at Otago University, where he was an invited keynote speaker. As we entered the Air New Zealand lounge at Wellington airport, Tame realized he had lost his boarding pass. In spite of the fact that the international airport is a key site of securitization in the post-9/11 world and Tame had literally been charged with terrorist activities within the previous decade,

the Air New Zealand agent, without requesting any form of identification, said simply, “Don’t worry, Mr. Iti, we’ll print you a new one.” She then turned to Julie and said, “He’s always so beautifully dressed, isn’t he?” Indeed.

Notes

¹ Marcos is not actually indigenous but is a mestizo intellectual from Mexico City who has been part of the Zapatista struggle since the early 1990s.

² We have been interacting with Tame Iti in person and by email since 2015. In July 2015, we spent four days in the Tūhoe Nation, interviewing Tame, visiting his painting studio, and spending time with him and other Tūhoe. We also spent three days with Tame in Dunedin, Aotearoa/New Zealand in May 2016.

³ The Waitangi Tribunal is a permanent body established in 1975 to investigate claims pertaining to historical violations of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), signed between the British Crown and at least 530 Māori chiefs.

⁴ Waitangi Day is an annual national holiday that commemorates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and has in recent decades been a day of widespread Māori protests.

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